



## Mastered (The Enforcers series)

By Maya Banks

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**The #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the Surrender Trilogy and the Breathless Trilogy knows what makes readers hot. Now she turns it up in *Mastered*, the explosive first book in a new series of a desire too dangerous to resist.**

**What he wants, he takes with no remorse or guilt.**

She stood out in his club like a gem, unspoiled and untouched. A lamb among wolves, she clearly didn't belong. Drawn to her innocence he watched as she was surrounded by men who saw what he did—but no one but him could touch her. He summoned her to his private quarters. He sensed her fear. He also recognized the desire in her eyes. And he knew she wouldn't leave before he possessed her. She had no need to know his secrets. Not until he had her under his complete and utter control.

**What he wants, she isn't sure she can give him.**

The moment he told her what he wanted, she couldn't resist. Instinct told her to run, but her heart said stay and walk the fine line between pleasure and pain. Though she wasn't sure she could ever completely surrender, the primal part of her wanted to try, even knowing this man could break her in ways she never imagined. Because once he possessed her, he owned her and it would be too late to turn back. She can only pray that he doesn't destroy her in the end.

*From the Trade Paperback edition.*

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## **Mastered (The Enforcers series) By Maya Banks Bibliography**

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## **Editorial Review**

Review

### **Praise for the novels of Maya Banks**

“If you haven’t read this series yet, you totally should...Incredibly awesome...I love Maya Banks and I love her books.”—Jaci Burton, *New York Times* bestselling author

“A must-read for...Christine Feehan and Lora Leigh fans.”—*Fresh Fiction*

“Maya Banks...really dragged me through the gamut of emotions. From... ‘Is it hot in here?’ to ‘Oh my GOD’...I’m ready for the next ride now!”—*USA Today*

“[A] one-two punch of entertainment that will leave readers eager for the next book.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“For those who like it naughty, dirty, and do-me-on-the-desk HAWT!”—Examiner.com

### About the Author

Maya Banks is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of The Surrender Trilogy and The Breathless Trilogy. Her chart toppers have included erotic romance, romantic suspense, contemporary romance, and Scottish historical romance.

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### Chapter 1

Evangeline stared in the mirror, barely recognizing the wide-eyed woman staring back at her. She didn’t react as her friends Lana, Nikki and Steph hovered around her, putting the finishing touches on her makeup and hair, ensuring everything was perfect.

“I can’t do this,” Evangeline muttered. “This is insane and I can’t believe I let you guys talk me into this.”

Nikki fixed her with a hard stare in the mirror. “You’re going. No backing out now, girlfriend. I’d pay money to see the look on that jackass’s face when he sees exactly what he’s missing out on.”

The jackass in question being Evangeline’s ex-boyfriend, Eddie.

“I’d say he didn’t miss anything at all,” Evangeline said quietly, embarrassment washing over her all over again.

Lana’s eyes were fierce and Steph’s scowl was intimidating. Any other time, Evangeline would be heartened by their display of loyalty and friendship. But she regretted confiding in them the humiliating details of her breakup with Eddie. She should have just told them they’d decided to go separate ways. Except that Evangeline had already told her friends that she was a virgin and that her last date with Eddie was the night. She was going to give him her virginity, confident that he was the one.

What a hopeless, flaming idiot that made her. His words still rang in her ears. Every single one had been like a knife to the heart, only he hadn't been content to simply plunge the blade. He'd twisted it, drawing out her pain as much as possible.

"Eddie is an asshole," Steph hissed. "Hon, we all knew it. Don't you remember us trying to talk you out of giving it up for him that night—or any night for that matter? You have nothing to be ashamed of. Nothing. He's a dick."

"Amen," Nikki said fervently. "Which is why you're going to march into Impulse like you fucking own the place. You look hot. And I don't say that as your best friend trying to make you feel better about yourself. I say that as another female who is aware that a much hotter female is in her territory and I'd like to scratch her eyes out because I know I don't have a chance in hell of looking as good as she does."

Evangeline's head reared in surprise and her startled gaze found Nikki's in the mirror.

Lana shook her head and sighed. "You don't get it, Vangie. And hell, I think that's half the turn-on for guys. You have no clue how beautiful you are. You're all big eyes, gorgeous hair, a figure to die for and you're good and sweet to your soul. If you had any hint of interest, you'd have men tripping over themselves to get next to you. They'd treat you like the queen you deserve to be treated as, but you honestly have no idea and that just makes them want you even more."

Evangeline shook her head, utterly baffled. "You guys are crazy. I'm a twenty-three-year-old recently ex-virgin who's as gauche as they come. I'm barely off the farm and have a southern drawl that makes New Yorkers roll their eyes and want to pat me on the head and say, 'Well, bless your heart.' I'm a fish out of water here and you all know it. I should have never come here. If it weren't for Mama and Papa, I'd go home and find work there."

Lana threw up her hands. "One day someone is going to make you see you the way everyone else sees you. Eddie is a smug bastard and saw you as a conquest. He knows he's not good enough to lick your shoes and he sucks in bed, but he'd never admit that so he tears you down instead."

Evangeline lifted her head. "Please. Can we not talk about Eddie tonight? It's bad enough I might see him even though he may have changed his mind about going tonight. He could have lied about wanting to take me like he's lied about everything else. I'm not prepared for this. I'm scared to death and I have no wish to be humiliated all over again."

"Sweetie, the point of tonight is to see him. Or rather for him to see you so he can kick himself in the balls for what he could have had," Nikki reminded her.

Steph shoved a VIP pass into Evangeline's hand, making sure she took it and didn't lay it aside.

"I could only score one or one of us would go with you. But the line is long and people wait all night and never get in. With this pass, you walk straight to the front, show the bouncer manning the door the pass and voilà. You're in. And then, girlfriend? You work it. You walk in there, head high, like you don't need a man, and you give every man, including Eddie, a taste of what they could have but can't touch. You have a few drinks. And if Eddie looks your way, you do not cower. You do not lower your head. You stare him directly in the eye and you smile. And then you don't pay him another second of attention, like he doesn't exist. Dance if you want to. Flirt. Get your mojo back. Your confidence. And when you're ready to go home, you call the number on the card I gave you. Wait fifteen minutes and then go outside. Your ride will be there and then you get your ass back here to us and give us the 411 on the entire evening."

Lana touched her shoulder. “And listen. If anything, and I mean anything goes wrong, you call or text us. We can be there in no time flat and we’re not doing anything tonight. We’ll be here for you when you get home, but if you need us before then, you let us know. I don’t care how long that damn line is. I’ll kick the bouncer’s ass if he tries to keep us from rescuing one of my girls.”

A smile hovered on Evangeline’s lips and her eyes gleamed with amusement, not because she didn’t believe Lana. She absolutely did. Her friends were fiercely protective of her, of each other, and Evangeline had no doubt that Lana would take on a two-hundred-plus-pound bouncer—and win—if she knew Evangeline needed her.

She reached for Lana’s hand and squeezed. Hard. Then she glanced up to include Steph and Nikki in her grateful gaze.

“You guys are the best. Y’all have done so much for me. I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you.”

Nikki rolled her eyes and Steph just snorted.

“Like you haven’t been there for us every bit as much? You haven’t nursed us through our share of broken hearts, held our hair while we puked after getting shit-faced over some asshole guy who isn’t good enough for us? Then told us that the douche bag who broke our heart wasn’t fit to touch the hem of our shirts much less anything else? Sound familiar?”

Steph’s reproach made Evangeline grimace. Because she was right. Everything they were doing now for her, she’d done for them. But she wasn’t used to being the recipient. She didn’t date much. Hadn’t dated at all in the first two years after she’d moved to the city from the small town in the south she’d been born and raised in. She’d been too focused on working, taking extra shifts, saving as much money as possible to send back to her mama.

It wasn’t until Eddie had walked into the bar where Evangeline waitressed and then kept coming back night after night until he had worn her down that she’d agreed to go out with him. He’d come on hard and fast, but Evangeline had rebuffed him. Looking back, she could see that she’d been nothing more than a challenge to him. Like waving a red flag in front of a bull’s nose. By holding him off and not putting out, she’d only made him that much more determined to get into her pants.

The fact that he was the first to do so just made his victory all the more sweet.

Bastard.

She nearly bared her teeth as anger made her cheeks go hot, but she didn’t want to mess up her carefully applied lipstick or makeup. The girls had spent an hour making sure she was made up to perfection. And the entire time they’d hovered, offered their unconditional support—in between muttering threats that didn’t bear repeating against Eddie—and boosting her nonexistent confidence.

And it was because of these three women that Evangeline was going to walk into the club that Eddie had been bragging about being a member of, even though the mere thought of it made her want to hide under her bed for a week, and she was going to pull it off. Bold. Beautiful. Confident. Give Eddie a taste of exactly what he could have had.

Her mouth nearly turned down into a moue. He’d already had her. And by his accounts, it was nothing special. No, not even that. It—she—had been terrible. How the hell was she going to walk into a club and make a man regret fucking her over when he’d already had what her friends said he’d regret what he could

have had?

It was more likely he'd laugh in her face and ask her what man would ever want a frigid bitch like her.

The confidence she'd spent the entire afternoon summoning fled in a heartbeat and she glanced up at her friends in the mirror, her mouth opening to call the whole thing off, when all three of the pinned her with their fiercest glares.

How did they do that? They knew exactly what she was about to say. But then they'd always been able to read her like a book. For that matter, according to Eddie, so could everyone else. He made it sound like a bad quality. Honesty. Not playing games or pretending to be something she wasn't.

She didn't mind it with her girls because it made her feel special. Like they were close enough friends to know what she was thinking at any given time. But it hadn't been remotely comforting to find out that apparently she was transparent to everyone else in the world as well.

How the hell was she ever supposed to protect herself, guard herself and keep from getting hurt if she couldn't disguise her thoughts and feelings?

"Don't even think about it," Lana warned.

Nikki knelt down so she was eye level with Evangeline where she was perched on the vanity stool. Where she'd spent the last hour being fussed over by her friends. Her sisters. Her expression was gentle and understanding.

"Listen to me, honey. You need to do this for yourself. Not for us. Sure as hell not for Eddie. Not for anyone else but you. He took something from you and you need it back. If you let him get into your head and you start believing that shit he fed you, then he wins. And you cannot let him get to you that way. Because what he said is bullshit. It is not true. And I won't have you believing it. So get it out of your head now. You have fifteen minutes until the taxi gets here to take you to the club, so get yourself sorted out. Do whatever you have to do, but do it for you."

Evangeline blinked furiously to keep tears at bay. Her friends would kill her if she ruined her makeup. They'd have to start all over and she'd be way late to the club and it would only give her added incentive to back out. And Nikki was right. This was something she needed to do for herself.

Eddie had taken something from her and not just her virginity, which, by the way, was vastly overrated. Sex was overrated. He'd stripped her of her dignity and what little confidence she possessed. He'd left her with nothing but humiliation and no sense of self-worth.

No man was worth that, and it pissed her off that his words still stung. The sex? Completely unmemorable. But the words she'd never forget. They'd burned a hole in her brain and caused a wound she wasn't sure could ever be repaired.

If tonight would give her any part of the spine she so desperately lacked, then it was worth walking into a crowded, popular club alone and riding it out.

Her friends hadn't wanted her to go by herself. Not at all. But Steph had only been able to get her hands on one VIP pass, and VIP passes to Impulse were rare and precious, reserved for beautiful people. Rich people. Important people. Evangeline was none of those, but what would it hurt to pretend for one night that she did fit into that world?



Why couldn't she be Cinderella for one night and maybe get back a little of her own by flaunting in Eddie's face what he'd thrown away? Because Evangeline might not have had the most self-confidence in the world, but she did have confidence in her friends' abilities to make any woman look hot.

Tomorrow she could go back to being boring, quiet and mousy Evangeline. Working late nights at a bar where the tips were good and the owner looked out for his girls and she could put Eddie behind her for good. Not to mention swearing off men for good. She wasn't here to find a man, to date, or even to have a sex life. She was here because her family needed her support, and for them she could and would put her life on hold indefinitely.

Sure, she had dreams and goals. Things she wanted out of life that didn't include waitressing in a pub wearing a skirt that barely covered her ass and heels that had her feet screaming for relief at the end of the night. But for now her job provided what she and her family needed. There was plenty of time to pursue her own path. She was only twenty-three. She'd work four, maybe five more years. Stockpile enough money so that her mother didn't have to worry about finances.

She'd made a promise to herself that by the time she turned thirty, she'd do what she wanted. Make a life for herself. Have a life she could be proud of and surround herself with good, solid friends like Steph, Nikki and Lana.

She wanted to go to school. Learn a profession. She wanted to be more than a waitress barely scraping by. Her parents hadn't been able to afford to send her to college. She'd only managed to graduate high school by gaining her GED because she'd been forced to get a job as soon as she was old enough to work so she could provide for her family.

She had no regrets. She'd do anything for her mother and father. But that didn't mean she would live this life forever. Someday . . . Someday she'd have better. She wanted a husband and children. A stable relationship. Just not now.

"You ready?" Nikki asked, bringing Evangeline abruptly back to the here and now.

Evangeline huffed in a deep breath, squared her shoulders and looked at herself in the mirror. She did look pretty. She wouldn't go as far as to say hot as her friends had described her, but she wasn't ugly. She was even above average, even if she owed it all to her friends' magic touch with cosmetics and doing hair.

"Yeah," she murmured softly. "I'm ready."

## Chapter 2

Drake Donovan pulled up to the entrance of the employee parking lot situated in the back of Impulse and quickly punched the security code into the console of his car, waiting impatiently for the gate to open so he could pull through. More often than not, his driver squired him everywhere, but when he went to the club he drove himself so he could leave at will without waiting for his driver to collect him.

He pulled into the space marked reserved, the closest spot to the entrance. There were many reserved spaces that spanned the front of the lot, all for his partners, but he refrained from ever putting his name—or theirs—not wanting to announce to everyone who exactly parked where.

Collecting his briefcase, he climbed from the car and set a brisk pace to the back entrance, where again he'd have to enter the security code to gain access, but when he was mere steps away, a woman suddenly pushed her way in front of him, forcing him to take a hasty step backward or collide with her, something she evidently had no issue with.

He gave her a cursory once-over and mentally cursed. She was scantily clad, with a lot of makeup and an expensive hairstyle, and there was sultry invitation in her hazel eyes, though the color was hard to make out with all the smoky eye makeup that covered from eyebrows to eyelashes.

"Mr. Donovan," she gushed, reaching to put her hand on his arm.

He flinched away, his stare glacial. "You're trespassing on private property, or did you not see all the signs and the fact that the only way into this parking lot is via a security gate?"

Her heavily painted lips turned down into a pout, but clear invitation still shone brightly in her eyes.

"I was hoping you'd like some company tonight," she said breathlessly. "I can be very accommodating."

Her look informed him that if he told her to drop to her knees right there on the pavement and suck him off, she'd do it with no hesitation and in record time. Jesus. The only way she could have gotten in was to have climbed over the high fence surrounding the employee parking lot. Or . . . someone had let her in. And if that was the case, heads were going to roll and someone was going to get fired. As soon as he got upstairs, he'd review the surveillance footage to determine just how this woman had gotten past his security.

He prided himself on impenetrable security. Even if she had attempted to climb over, she most certainly should have been detected and apprehended and escorted off the premises long before Drake ever arrived.

"Unfortunately for you, I'm not in a very accommodating mood tonight," he said in an icy tone.

He immediately inserted the earpiece that would key him into all the activity going on in the club, his direct link to all his employees, and he barked a quick order.

"I need security to the parking lot now."

The woman's eyes widened in fear. "What are you going to do? I only wanted to please you. You're a very handsome man, Mr. Donovan. I think once you've had a taste of what I can offer you, you won't be disappointed."

"I'm more disappointed that you're making me late for work and you're trespassing where you don't belong."

The door burst open, and two of his bouncers ran toward Drake, tense, alert and ready for action.

"What's up, boss?" Colbin asked.

Drake pointed at the now-furious-looking woman.

"Escort her out immediately, and from now on if anyone, and I mean anyone, gets into this lot who doesn't have clearance, I'll fire every single person in charge of surveillance."

"You have no idea what you're passing up," the woman hissed, her fingers curling into claws.

“Oh, I know damn well what I’m passing on,” he drawled. “And I couldn’t be any less interested in a skank who throws herself at me with promises to please me when the very sight of you displeases me very much.”

She launched herself at Drake, her long, painted nails aimed directly at his face.

Matthews stepped between her and Drake immediately, and Colbin curled his arm around her waist, lifting her effortlessly as she let out a shriek of outrage and began kicking and thrashing, trying to lash those nails across his face.

“Fuck,” Colbin bit out. “Get yourself together, bitch. You’re making a fool of yourself. Mr. Donovan has no interest in you, and furthermore, he does not tolerate invasion of his privacy. If he wants you, he’ll contact you. Don’t ever come at him like this again, or you’ll find yourself sitting inside a jail cell. Consider yourself lucky, he’s letting you go with only a warning this time.”

“Bastard,” she threw out at Drake as Colbin hauled her to the gate.

As he walked, Matthews radioed for a car to pull to the gate immediately to get rid of “an unwanted guest,” which only made the woman shriek louder in outrage.

“I’m sorry, boss,” Matthews said in a sober voice. “I have no idea how she got in, but I’m going to find out right away and make sure it never happens again.”

“You do that,” Drake snapped. “And while you’re at it, arrange to have barbed wire installed at the top of the fences. A few guard dogs wouldn’t be amiss. You’ll just have to take the time to acquaint all my employees with the dogs and ensure they don’t mistake them as intruders. This is ridiculous.”

“I’m on it, boss. I won’t fail you.”

Drake walked dismissively by Matthews and spoke into his com. “Viper and Thane. Pull surveillance from the employee parking lot for the previous two hours and have it set to play in my office. I want it ready to go as soon as I get to my office. I’m on my way up.”

“You got it,” Thane replied immediately.

Drake shook his head in disgust. The woman was no different from the women lined up down the block outside the entrance to Impulse, all eagerly awaiting the opportunity to get in. Some would; some wouldn’t. There were a few couples, both one-nighters and steady relationships, but mostly women—and men—came here to hook up, be seen, up their status and pretend to be what they weren’t.

He strode inside and merely nodded at the greetings from the employees he passed, in a hurry to get to his office, where he had a bird’s-eye view of everything that went on in his club. He catered to exactly the clientele that Impulse attracted, but it didn’t diminish his disgust or impatience with the type of people who frequented his establishment.

He even indulged when it suited him, but he never kept a woman for more than one night—two at the absolute most—and there were two places he never brought a woman. His office at Impulse or his home. He had very exacting standards when it came to the women whom he took to his bed, the number one being absolute submission and him being in complete control, just as he was in control of every aspect of his business and personal life.

He'd created his world, his empire, by being ruthless and cutthroat when it was necessary, and he had no regrets, because he was a man who was feared by many and given absolute respect and deference. That fact served him well. He had no weaknesses to exploit. There was no way to penetrate his carefully guarded defenses and his top-of-the-line security. If it made him arrogant to consider himself God, so be it, because he was God. At least in his world.

Maddox and Silas were waiting in his office, their expressions grim.

"I hear you had a problem in the parking lot," Maddox said.

Silas just stood there, his stare inquiring, but then he wasn't a man of many words. He didn't need words to get his point across. And people weren't exactly lining up to have a conversation with him since a mere look usually scared the piss out of them.

"Apparently," Drake said acidly.

Even as he spoke, he reached for the remote and focused his attention on the screen where the surveillance footage of the parking lot would be displayed. Impatiently, he fast-forwarded until finally he discovered the source of the breach.

"Son of a bitch," Maddox growled.

Drake's expression was grim as he watched one of his newer employees pull in and park at the very back of the lot and get out as though he was merely showing up for work. It wasn't until he was well into the building that the backseat door opened and the woman who'd thrown herself at Drake crept surreptitiously from the vehicle, hunched down so as not to be seen.

"Fire him," Drake snapped in Maddox's direction. "Escort him off the premises and then eliminate his security clearance to all entrances to the club."

Maddox wasted no time departing to do Drake's bidding, leaving Silas alone with Drake. Drake took a seat at his desk and made sure all the monitors that covered every inch of the club were online. Then he turned his attention to Silas, the man who took care of any problems Drake encountered. He also cleaned up any unwanted messes. He did so with unflappable efficiency and never failed.

"I want you to pay Garner a visit and tell him he's behind in his payments and he has precisely forty-eight hours to pay up or he loses my protection. Make it clear I'm not bluffing and if he fails to come through, he's on his own and he's a dead man."

Silas nodded. "I'll leave now."

Drake nodded. "Report back to me as soon as you've spoken to him and let me know the situation. He owes me a lot of money. You can also tell him that if he doesn't pay up, the least of his worries will be Vanucci because I'll come after him myself and I'll make whatever Vanucci will do to him look like child's play."

"Consider it done," Silas said, even as he turned and disappeared into the far corner where the darkness concealed another exit from the office.

Drake clenched his jaw. Just another day at the office, only the desperate woman throwing herself at him pissed him off more than Garner defaulting on past-due payments. If he wanted a woman, he never had to look far. He damn sure didn't need some bitch clinging to him like a burr, expecting him to fall all over himself to take what she so vulgarly offered.

Women didn't call the shots with him. Ever. If he saw something he wanted, he took it. He was in control. Always. No exceptions. Not a woman. Not anyone. And he planned to keep it that way.

Evangeline stepped hesitantly from the cab after paying the fare—money given to her by her girls with a look in their eyes that said Don't even think about refusing—and for a moment she stood there like an idiot, nervously surveying the line that extended down the sidewalk and wrapped around the block.

Then realizing how conspicuous—and out of place—she looked standing there gawking like a moron, she started toward the entryway, where a burly, scary-looking bouncer stood in front of a roped-off area that led to the inside, his huge arms crossed over an even huger chest.

She swallowed nervously as he caught sight of her and obviously saw her intention to walk in. His gaze narrowed and flitted up and down her, his lips thinning. Her back went up, as did her chin. She'd had enough of feeling unworthy and she'd be damned if she was judged and found lacking by a freaking bouncer.

A glance down the sidewalk told her why he was looking at her like she was nuts. Beautiful people stood, waiting for their opportunity to get in. Glitzy, glamorous. Women in expensive dresses, heels, jewelry draped from head to toe, hair that probably cost a fortune to have made up at the stylist. And then there were the men. Polished. Preppy. Rich looking. Some alone, no doubt using Impulse as hunting ground for a pickup and an easy lay. Others were there with their date for the evening, an arm wrapped securely around a gorgeous woman.

She was so jealous that for a moment she couldn't breathe. What it must be like to be one of those beautiful people. To be able to take their looks and bodies for granted. To be able to get any man they wanted with a snap of their fingers.

She noticed that she'd caught the attention of those at the front of the line. Women openly sneered at her, mocking glances thrown her way as if to tell her, As if you'll get in.

She turned her attention back to the bouncer, who was now just a body space away, and he stepped forward, speaking before she could say or do anything.

"Quota has been filled tonight," he said simply. "Sorry, but you'll have to go elsewhere. Or home," he added after another sweep of her body.

Her cheeks scorched hot at the judgment in his gaze. He hadn't even told her that the line formed at the rear. He hadn't even told her she'd have to wait. He'd dismissed her. Told her she was unwelcome in a place like Impulse, and that just pissed her off.

So she pulled out her trump card, snapping it angrily in front of his face, holding the VIP card so it was impossible for him not to see.

"I don't think so," she hissed between her teeth.

He looked surprise. And then uneasy. Hesitant even. And this was not a man she'd think was ever indecisive. Then she realized he was actually debating refusing her access even though she had the "golden ticket." A coveted VIP pass that allowed its owner to enter, no questions asked. He would know that someone important in the club had given it to her. He didn't have to know it hadn't been given directly to her. No one in their right mind ever gave away a VIP pass to this club, so his only logical conclusion was that it had been given to her personally and she wasn't about to correct his assumption.

Still, he didn't look happy at all as he reached down to unlatch the velvet rope that was strung between two metal poles just outside the doorway to the club.

"Have a good time, miss," he said formally, as he motioned her by.

She glanced at the line from the corner of her eye, drawing smug satisfaction as she saw more than a few mouths drop open. Some expressions were openly outraged. She even heard someone protest that she had gotten in while they were still standing out on the sidewalk waiting.

"VIP pass," the bouncer rumbled, by way of explanation.

Yep, that pretty much said it all. VIP meant an all-access ticket to everything in the club. Steph had been there before and had brought her up to speed on the club, the layout, so she wouldn't make a complete fool of herself by not knowing what the hell she was doing once inside.

Though Steph had told her about the front bar area, she was still surprised by how pleasantly quiet it was when she made her way into the lavishly decorated social area that was sectioned off from the dance floor and the huge bar in the center of the dance floor.

It was a genius idea to have a quieter area with a bar so people could actually talk and hear one another instead of yelling over the music. It would also give her time to have a drink in a quiet area so she could work up her courage to venture onto the dance floor.

Steph had explained that the dance floor was like a stadium with the bar in the center and the dance floor surrounding it on all sides. Then beyond the dance floor were the public places to sit. These were unenclosed areas with tables and chairs to rest after dancing and have a drink, although conversation was pretty much out.

Above the public seating were the private boxes. These were enclosed rooms with a waiter or waitress assigned to each, and music could be heard or not heard with the flip of a switch. They were larger and more comfortable sitting areas than the public seating below with couches, plush armchairs and a large table for setting drinks and food on.

The only thing it lacked, Evangeline had dryly remarked on, was a bed for people hooking up to have sex. She'd shut up quickly when Steph had seriously informed her that there were even more private rooms at the top of the club, access strictly monitored, which meant you had to be pretty damn important—or rich—to get in, and they were equipped with all the necessary comforts for couples to do as they wanted.

How Steph knew all this, Evangeline didn't know, and she hadn't asked, though she'd seen Nikki and Lana's open curiosity and knew they would certainly ask at first opportunity. Evangeline figured if Steph had wanted them to know, she would have volunteered where she got her info, so she hadn't pursued the matter and had continued asking questions before either Nikki or Lana could pounce on the opportunity to grill their friend.

Evangeline made her way to the bar, pondering how many drinks she could afford and how she should space them accordingly so it didn't look so obvious that she didn't belong. If she bought one, she could nurse it a long time and at least look like she was doing something other than standing around looking and feeling out of place. But then again she needed at least one drink in her to fortify herself before venturing onto the dance floor, where she would likely see Eddie and whoever his latest conquest was.

She glanced down, wondering if she was out of her mind for thinking, even for a moment, that Eddie would

look at her and feel any regret for what he'd thrown away so callously. Even a freaking bouncer had found her lacking, so who was she kidding?

She murmured her order to the bartender and he smiled at her, his eyes twinkling. It was the first overt gesture of welcome she'd received since arriving at this place, so she smiled back. A genuine smile. One that said thank you. He winked at her and then began making her froufrou girly drink, as the girls called them. Hey, she couldn't help it that she was a complete lightweight when it came to alcohol. Just because she served the stuff every night didn't mean she partook of it.

Besides, she liked fruity drinks and she especially appreciated that the bartender stuck one of those tropical umbrellas along with a cherry into the drink just before sliding it over the bar to her.

"On the house, babe," he said when she carefully pulled out one of the bills from her precious cache in the tiny clutch she had draped cross-body so she didn't have to worry about dropping it or laying it down and forgetting about it.

She lifted her startled gaze to him. "But you can't do that. You'll get into trouble!"

He winked again and just shook his head before heading down to attend to another customer.

Well. Maybe not everyone found her a miserable failure. And he was pretty cute. No, not cute. There was one thing she was picking up on even though she hadn't ventured far into the club yet. The men who worked here weren't pretty boys. They were guys who were buff and built and looked like they could handle themselves in a fight. And the women were beautiful. Classy looking and elegant. There would be no looking down one's nose at one of the waitresses here because they looked like high-society chicks who just happened to be serving drinks. Apparently being beautiful was not only a requirement of being allowed into the club but also to work here.

She was so out of place it wasn't even funny.

She turned around, bringing the glass to her mouth, noticing several glances thrown her way. She fidgeted uncomfortably. Was it that obvious she didn't belong? One could only take so much judgment even if she had marched in here determined to get some of her own back.

After observing yet another set of eyes flashing in her direction, she decided she'd had enough. This was absurd. What was she trying to prove? And why? She didn't have to prove anything to anyone but herself, and she knew she was better off without Eddie. She hadn't come in here so he'd drop to his knees and beg her to come back. Not that it wasn't an appealing image if for no other reason she could kick him in the balls and tell him, Over my dead body.

An ache filtered into her chest. No, she'd simply come because she'd wanted him to know he was wrong. That she wasn't a mousy, passionless woman. She could be beautiful. Even if none of it was real and was, instead, courtesy of her friends' skill with hair and makeup. Not to mention the dress and shoes they'd outfitted her in. The way-too-form-fitting dress that outlined every single curve and dip of her body. A dress she would have never dared to wear before even if her friends forever despaired of her hiding what they called a "hot mama body."

Whatever. They were her friends and they were entitled to be biased. But Evangeline knew the truth. Just as Eddie also knew the truth, and she was a fool to come here and think for a moment he'd change his mind and regret anything.

She was about to turn and place her drink back on the bar and then swiftly take her leave when she saw him from the corner of her eye.

Oh shit, oh shit!

She froze, not wanting to turn quickly to hide in case he'd already seen her, because she would not make it obvious that she was trying to hide. Instead she pretended interest in the dance floor through the wide soundproof double doors to her left as though she were just finishing up her drink before opting to make her way out onto it.

Maybe he hadn't seen her. Maybe he was leaving.

Laughter sounded close. Too damn close.

Shit.

All her maybes went right out of the door. Where she wished Eddie had gone.

"What the hell are you doing here, Evangeline?" Eddie asked, amusement thick in his voice.

She slowly turned her cool gaze on him, purposely widening them as if surprised to see him.

"Oh hello, Eddie," she said. She nodded politely at the woman clinging like a burr to his arm. The woman who did not look pleased that Eddie was talking to Evangeline. "I would think it's obvious what I'm doing here. What does anyone do here? They have a few drinks and dance. Which is precisely what I intend to do. If you'll excuse me, I'm heading onto the floor. Good to see you. Hope y'all have a good night."

She started to slip past Eddie, but his hand flew out and cut painfully into her arm. She whirled in shock, staring at him like he'd lost his mind.

"Let go!" she said hoarsely. "Eddie, you're hurting me!"

He laughed cruelly. "What's your game, Evangeline? Come to find me? Beg me to come back to you? Want to go another round with me after I kicked you out of my bed? Come on, sweetheart. No one is that desperate. Sticking my dick in your cunt was like fucking a snowdrift."

Evangeline was shocked by his coarse language and the fact that he was speaking loudly enough for the entire bar to hear. Her cheeks burned in mortification and she staggered as though he'd struck her.

"Let go of me," she hissed.

But his grip only grew tighter, bruising her fair skin. She'd wear his fingerprints for days.

The woman at his side laughed, the sound tinkly and abrasive, like ice cubes dropping into a glass.

"Oh, this is the one you were telling me about," she said in a silky voice.

She stared at Evangeline, fake pity in her eyes.

"Too bad you weren't woman enough to keep him," she purred. "But you can bet I'll be woman enough to keep him satisfied."



Evangeline was too shocked, too mortified to respond. She should have responded with cutting remarks of her own. Not showing either of them how much they'd ripped her apart. Her only triumph was that she managed—barely—to keep the tears that burned the edges of her eyes at bay because that was more humiliation than even she could bear. He'd made her cry once. Never again would she allow him to do it.

“What I think,” she said, proud of her calm, even tone, “is that you and your little prostitute should skitter on out of here and back to the alley where you belong. And if you don't let go of my arm, I'll press assault charges.”

Eddie's eyes narrowed as fury washed over his features. His cheeks grew red and mottled as he advanced, pushing farther into her space until she could feel and smell his hot, fetid breath blasting her face. Menace burned brightly in his eyes, and she knew it was about to get even uglier.

“You little bitch!”

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